

Colonial's Rebecca Louise Vitelli named 2020 Delaware Teacher of the Year

An early childhood educator from the Colonial School District is Delaware's 2020 State Teacher of the Year.

Governor John Carney made the announcement tonight at the annual banquet honoring the 20 district and charter teachers of the year at Dover Downs Hotel and Conference Center in Dover.

Rebecca Louise Vitelli, who teaches prekindergarten for the Colonial Early Education Program located at the Colwyck Center, now is Delaware's nominee for National Teacher of the Year, a title she hopes will allow her to share her message about the importance of all children having access to quality early childhood education.

Vitelli, whose classes include a mix of students with disabilities and their typically developing peers, said all children are born with an innate drive and extraordinary ability to learn: "They have remarkable potential, which can be achieved by early intervention."

Relationships drive that learning, especially in early childhood, she said. "Safety and security wire the brain to be able to learn. But when we feel connected, that's when we're willing to learn."

Teachers must remain consciously present listeners and encouragers, Vitelli said. "Many of my students begin school without the ability to speak. However, this in no way means they have nothing to say. We teach children to express themselves in a multitude of ways. We show them that communication is powerful, and that others will listen and value what they have to share."

In her application, Vitelli told the story of twin sisters with autism who entered Colonial's early education program at age 3. On their last day at Colwyck as 6-year-olds, their mother reflected on their growth in Colonial's program and Vitelli's class in a note to her daughters that Vitelli shared: "Three years ago, we were told you would never talk, and you would always be trapped inside 1-year-old brains. Three years later, you have proved them wrong."

Like these students, "children and their families need high-quality pre-K experiences, where love of learning and confidence can be nurtured to unlock their true potential," Vitelli said.

Despite being early in her career, Vitelli has exceptional skills. Said one former administrator, retired special education coordinator Debra Nuss: "You sit mesmerized by her seemingly effortless abilities to facilitate children's play within a carefully engineered, rich learning environment while individually addressing the complex needs of her students with great efficiency. Most of all, it is Rebecca's heartfelt joy, sincere compassion and genuine love of children that make her classroom such an enchanting place to learn."

Nuss said she remembers proofreading the first Individual Education Program (IEP) Vitelli wrote while working with her.

"I was astonished and overwhelmed. The preparation, the detail, the thoughtfulness and the accuracy of the IEP was superior to any other teacher's IEP on my caseload. Rebecca's talents are so completely instinctual and were revealed so naturally," Nuss said.

Her principal shared a story about how Vitelli has built positive and lasting relationships with her students and families, extending her support to her children to outside of the school day. After one boy's parents told Vitelli about their struggles with their son's behavior at their church,

Vitelli attended church with the family to provide guidance and support to his Sunday School teachers.

"It didn't matter that it was the weekend, it didn't matter that they practice a different religion, what mattered to her was that her student and his family needed her help and trusted her to support them," Principal Katrina Daniels said.

Vitelli earned both of her degrees from the University of Delaware: Bachelor of Science in early childhood education and Master of Education in exceptional children and youth with a concentration in autism/severe disabilities.

She inherits from outgoing Teacher of the Year Dana Bowe the responsibility of representing all teachers in Delaware. She will address community groups, business leaders, legislators, and educational organizations to inform the public about the status of Delaware schools. She also will become Delaware's candidate in the National Teacher of the Year Program, a project of the Council of Chief State School Officers sponsored by the Voya Foundation.

By action of the General Assembly, she will receive a \$5,000 grant to use for the educational benefit of her students, as well two personal grants totaling an additional \$5,000. The remaining 19 school district/charter candidates each will receive a personal grant of \$2,000. All 20 teachers also received gifts from Advantech Incorporated and their district superintendents or charter principal.

Vitelli also will receive gifts from the Delaware Association of School Administrators, Delaware State Education Association and Delaware School Boards Association; State of Delaware Teacher of the Year commemorative plates from the Division of Motor Vehicles; a full doctorate program from University of Delaware and Wilmington University; graduate tuition from Delaware State University and Wesley College; a watch from the Delaware State Teachers of the Year

Association; a 10-karat gold ring from Jostens; and lunch in Washington D.C. with U.S. Sen. Tom Carper.

This year's celebration was sponsored in part by Voya Financial.

NOTE TO MEDIA: Those interested in arranging interviews or visits to Vitelli's classroom on Wednesday should contact Lauren.Wilson@colonial.k12.de.us.

Find information on all 20 nominees [here](#).

Find a photo of Vitelli [here](#).

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